

Managing Tourism within a Sustainable Carrying Capacity



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[Photo: Rainbow at Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe.]

It's the largest mass migration in human history — and it happens every year. It ranks among the largest industries on Earth and is probably the only one with a positive North-South cash flow. But unless tourism is managed properly, it can be "an engine of destruction" rather than a force for human development, warns [Ted Manning](#), an international expert on sustainable tourism.

For places that are popular tourist destinations, the challenge is to keep tourists out of trouble, keep them housed, and provide the infrastructure that they need, stated Dr Manning during a recent seminar hosted by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC)'s [Sustainable Tourism Research Interest Group](#) (STRING). "Those places that aren't ready to cope with tourism are going to be overwhelmed," he added, "and their societies denatured. Therefore, tourism is one of the single largest development challenges."

Dr Manning noted that in many nations, particularly in the Caribbean and south Pacific, tourists can outnumber the resident population in peak seasons. For example, cruise ships that stop at a small island like Grenada generally carry between 750 and 3,500 passengers. When the passengers disembark, they "stress the infrastructure to the point where it is almost impossible for locals to get any services."

Source of pollution

Not surprisingly, tourism is often a major source of environmental and, in some cases, cultural pollution. "Every time you gain tourists you place certain elements of your culture in peril," he said. "If every tourist took home a piece of the Great Wall of China, they could unbuild it in less time than it took to build it."

According to Dr Manning, tourist destinations tend to follow a similar evolutionary path. First come the rich or adventurous. Next come the travel writers. At this point, a destination may become a popular spot and package tours are launched. "Soon, people come back and say they had a horrible time there, it was too crowded, it was overused, they couldn't get service," which creates a spiral of decay and decline. "Tourists won't go where the economy, the society, the ecology is degraded. Not only that, they won't go where they think it's degraded."

Carrying capacity

"It is only through government control, management of the industry, and self-policing that you can begin to counter that [downward spiral]," he said. For tourism managers, one of the most challenging tasks is to estimate the carrying capacity of an attraction or destination — in other words, "how many tourists are too many." For example, on a romantic tropical beach at dusk, three people may be too many. On the other hand, in a [youth resort in Romania](#), hundreds of people on the beach may not be perceived as too many if the tourists have come for the party atmosphere.

Other key management issues include: How does one clearly identify the long term costs and benefits to decide how much tourism is enough? How does one take the benefits to rural areas and still ensure they remain rural and remote? How does one integrate environmental planning into a development culture? And how does one identify the threats to long term sustainability? The ultimate goal, Dr Manning concluded, is "to keep tourism from eating its own, from eating the assets that bring tourists there in the first place. If we succeed, tourism becomes a force for a more sustainable development — to the benefit of both the industry and the destinations which it targets."

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